

## SOCIALISM IN MILWAUKEE

BY ALBERT JAY NOCK

AT the spring election in 1910 the city of Milwaukee elected a Socialist administration. The Mayor was Emil Seidel, a German pattern-maker, a very honest man, and as brimful of Socialism as ever he could hold. The Socialists commanded a majority in the City Council, and the election was heralded everywhere as a great triumph for Socialism.

They gave Milwaukee about the best administration it ever had. Nevertheless, at the next election, in 1912, they were defeated by a coalition of the discredited old-line parties, and Dr. G. A. Bading was elected Mayor, with but one or two Socialist hold-overs. His administration was in most respects far less satisfactory than Seidel's; and yet at the next election, April 7, 1914, he was re-elected easily over Seidel—who had run against him and been defeated also in 1912—and the last of the Socialist vestiges were swept out.

This is a very interesting phenomenon and demands explanation. If the Seidel administration had been a conspicuous scandal or a conspicuous failure, the change in public sentiment would explain itself. But it was neither. Its integrity was beyond cavil, and even those who voted against it freely say that it was better in most respects than the admin-

istration they supported for re-election. On the face of her history, Milwaukee seems to show a deliberate preference for the worse after having had a competent taste of the better.

And this, naturally, is how the party Socialists account for the change. They put it down to the malignancy and venality of the brute mass of us who sit in darkness and prefer darkness to light. But this will hardly answer. People, after all, know their fellow-men rather well—too well, at least, to assent to a hasty and cynical generalization like this. Malignancy and venality in the mass come down to malignancy and venality in Smith and Brown, our neighbors, who, as we know, are not malignant and not especially venal. Smith and Brown are commonplace persons who do not like to think when they can help it, and therefore seldom act on a logical motive of any kind. They are swayed largely by their feelings, and do not often ask themselves, or care greatly about, the strict logic of what they do. And as they act, so they vote. Smith and Brown vote out of a marvelous mixture of motive, consisting of information, misinformation, tradition, buncombe, habit, indolence, preoccupation, and prejudice—all in varying proportions, and the whole delectable hodgepodge occasionally salted with a

small dose of thought. The saving thing about all this is that it is mostly instinctive, and human instincts are generally right. But this is what the Socialists do not take into account, and hence their diagnosis of Milwaukee dissatisfies those who know perhaps less about Socialism than they should, but who know a great deal about the human nature of Smith and Brown.

So we must look further; and first we note that the estimate put by the Socialists on the election of Seidel in 1910 is not warranted by the facts. The Socialists acclaimed it as a vindication and a triumph for Socialism. Really, it was nothing of the kind. Of the 27,000 votes that elected Seidel, it is barely possible by counting every goose a swan that 15,000 were Socialists and "sympathizers"—persons, that is, who had some kind of remote and indefinite interest in Socialism. This number stands far in excess of my own belief about the situation. I should say 12,000 was a very handsome concession, and when a Socialist newspaper man put the figure for me at 10,000 I thought he was very near the mark.

The rest of Seidel's vote was made up of people who care no more for Socialism than they do for prohibition. What they wanted was good government. They were sick and tired of old-style Republican-Democrat ring rule. A non-partisan or independent candidacy was impossible, for at that time the Wisconsin law required a party designation on the ballot. The only party available besides the discredited Republicans and Democrats was the Socialist party; and the independent or disaffected vote swung to Seidel because it had nowhere else to swing. Seidel's election was, in a sense, a triumph for the local Socialists because he headed their ticket; but only as the election of Mr. Mitchel might be called a triumph for the impressive curiosity known as the Fusion movement in New York. A flare-up of intense dissatisfaction plus an absurd State law (since then fortunately abolished) gave Seidel votes enough to win. But his election was no more an indorsement of Socialism by the people of Milwaukee than it was an indorsement of prohibition.

Nevertheless, it was so claimed by party Socialists in Milwaukee, so heralded by party Socialists elsewhere, and so accepted by those who did not happen to know better. Seidel's returns were labeled "Socialist" in the press reports, notwithstanding his ticket bore the

official designation of "Social-Democrat" instead of "Socialist"—which of itself would set one thinking. The Socialists were by no means over-modest in their claims about what had fallen their way.

Considering the expectations of the large disaffected vote that elected them, this was a mistake. It was bad taste, if nothing worse. The circumstances of Seidel's election suggested that they should ease off greatly on partisanship, drop their class-conscious patter about capitalism and "the voice of labor," and the like, and not use public office for propaganda purposes. There was plenty of chance for them to show their faith by their works if they wanted to make friends for Socialism. No other way is so effective. If they had corked down their rhetorical and doctrinaire tendencies and stood pat on a record of sterling honesty plus moderate enterprise and reasonable achievement, they could have gone on holding office practically without effort as long as they liked.

Mayor Seidel saw this. It is to his lasting credit that, notwithstanding his devotion to Socialism, he appears to have realized that he was elected to do a job and not to spread the light. In his public utterances he talked more about good government than he did about Socialism. His few pages in the municipal campaign book are a refreshing oasis of good sense in a wilderness of claptrap. Moreover, he began his administration under a definite non-partisan policy. He made excellent appointments, getting the best men available, whether within or without the State. But neither in his soft-pedal policy of speech nor in his non-sectarian policy of action could he carry with him the rank and file of his party. The Socialists talked and talked; they raised a demand for spoils; they insisted on the indorsement of men and measures by the party caucus; and Seidel could not hold out against them. Unquestionably, no man could. In the matter of appointments, too, he was embarrassed by finding that the men he wanted would not come—he could not make them an offer that was attractive enough. So incompetent men began to be appointed; and, because they were incompetent, the number of city employees increased, thus giving rise to the wholly unjust suspicion that the Socialists were padding the pay-roll.

The practical shortcomings of the administration date from this point, and they amount relatively to very little. Seidel's programme

was altogether too ambitious, and he did not realize the value of saying as little as possible about what he proposed to do. His prospectus embraced nearly everything under the sun, from municipal ownership of public utilities to furnishing free water to washerwomen. Merely glancing through the campaign handbook makes one's head swim. Artemus Ward's happy saying that on a certain occasion he tried to do too much and did it, exactly fits the programme of Milwaukee activities. Seidel worked heroically and hard, and made some achievements; but he was busy with too many things at once to make a permanent success of any, or even to lay a permanent foundation for any.

But Milwaukee is quite well blessed with a sense of humor, and would not mind this much. Convinced of the administration's absolute integrity, the people were not too exacting in striking a balance between promise and delivery. Suppose the much-needed public markets were not built—the city's ramshackle bookkeeping system was put in shape. Suppose the new and cheaper street construction was a fizzle—assessments were readjusted on as fair a basis as possible under Wisconsin's iniquitous tax laws. Suppose the Housing Commission had done nothing—the City Attorney's office was fighting the people's legal battles in excellent style. Suppose the tax rate had not gone down—it had at least not gone up, and every one was comfortable in knowing that the city's money was spent with scrupulous honesty, and to better purpose, generally speaking, than it had ever been before.

No, Milwaukee could be counted on to be lenient with inexperience and ready to discount the Socialists' self-imposed expectations fully seventy-five per cent. If you go about Milwaukee asking questions, you will hear few complaints. There is some criticism of things done and left undone, but it is all good-tempered and none of it put up in the light of a real grievance. Ask what defeated the Socialists in 1912 and again in 1914, and ten to one your informant will merely shrug his shoulders. He cannot tell you. It is something that the average man seldom tries to put into words. It is a *feeling*. The sentiments of human nature work obscurely and express themselves blindly; and the Socialists were defeated for re-election by a general feeling of sheer personal resentment for which they alone were responsible.

"They talked themselves out of office,"

sententiously said a University of Wisconsin man to me; "it was hot air that put those people out of business." That pretty well expresses it. The people of Milwaukee liked Seidel, believed in him, believed in his associates. They forgave their failures and were well enough satisfied with their achievements. But the *spirit* of the Socialists, their fanatical class consciousness, their sectarianism, their fierce and bitter imperialism—this it was that made them utterly intolerable.

And why not? Seidel and his associates had been in office seven months when Victor L. Berger ran for Congress from the Milwaukee district and was elected. It is not clear whether he really expected all the people who had voted for Seidel out of an *impasse* of discontent to vote for him; but, if he did, or if the Socialist party did, the expectation was unreasonable and childish. A vote for Seidel in April on the acute local issue of good government did not logically imply a vote for Berger in November on the indifferent National issue of Socialism. But some notion of the kind must have beset the Socialists, for when Berger's vote fell below Seidel's they showed disappointment and acrimony. This might be understandable if Berger had been defeated, but he was elected. In his own signed statement published in the "Social-Democratic Herald" for November 12, 1910, Mr. Berger says:

Our vote went backward if compared with last spring; however, it did not go much backward as compared with the total vote cast.

The fact is, nevertheless, that we have lost all the so-called sympathizers and protesters—also all the goody-goodies and church-club men. . . . It was a class victory—a victory of the working class.

Then, after a couple of paragraphs relating to other reasons for the smaller vote cast for him, he adds:

We have good reason now to be thankful for these happenings.

*Ex pede Herculem!*—there you have it. The spirit which pervades that piece of writing is the same which constantly animated the utterances and shaped the attitude of the Milwaukee Socialists. You see just what it is—hard, dogged, truculent, unintelligent, and, above all, sectarian. This one specimen is worth more than a whole volume of commentary in exhibiting the reason for Seidel's defeat.

For what sort of reaction would this set up

in a mind not already prepossessed by Socialism? How would you like it? The sympathizers and protesters, goody-goodies and church-club men, were the ones who elected Seidel in 1910, the ones who liked him, believed in him, stood by him, and were ready to elect him again and yet again. All they asked in return, besides fairly good government, was a decent sense of fellow-citizenship. And this kind of thing is what they got.

Partisanship, class consciousness, sectarianism! One surveys the record of Socialism in Milwaukee and asks one's self whether there was ever anything on earth like it. The Socialists are on record as opposing every important democratic measure, except home rule for cities, that their independent local supporters were interested in. They opposed the movement for a non-partisan majority-vote election law, coalescing with Tory Republican and Democratic bosses of the Barnes-Penrose-Murphy type. Could anything be more short-sighted, considering how far the day of all that sort of thing is past? They opposed legislative efforts for majority rule in the election of judges, a reform greatly needed in Wisconsin, since judges, and school directors as well, had sometimes been elected by as little as one-fifth of the total vote. They opposed the short ballot and the small Council. The City Club drafted an excellent bill, quite in line of modern municipal reform, providing that the City Council should be reduced one-half; that the City Attorney's, Comptroller's, and Treasurer's offices should be appointive; that administrative positions should be filled on test of fitness; and that power of confirmation should be vested in a non-political civil service board instead of in the City Council. The Socialists opposed it. They opposed measures to concentrate power and responsibility in the hands of the Mayor. They opposed the wiping out of the ward system. They opposed modern charter reform.

I asked Mr. Berger why the Socialists opposed these experiments in the simplification of government, which to most of us seem moderate and reasonable. He replied, with some vehemence, "But will all those things put one more sandwich in the dinner-pail of the workingman?" What could one say? I went away feeling that I had once more encountered the reason why, as long as human nature remains what it is, a Socialist administration is bound to be at most a one-term affair.

The Socialists had a magnificent opportunity in Milwaukee, and simply frittered it away. They had great virtues—and every one gives them full credit. They gave a good administration—and every one appreciates it. They were honest and enterprising—and every one admires them for it. Their failure was a failure in imagination, in humor, in an instinctive knowledge of men. They chose the time when party ties are everywhere notably weakening as the time to insist on a stringent partisanship. They chose the time when men are more than ever set on obliterating distinctions of class and sect as the time to preach the gospel of class, promulgate the spirit of a sect, and pronounce in season and out of season the anathemas of a sect. Their impossibilist loyalties repelled, bewildered, and offended their friends, and their continuous assumption of a virtual monopoly of righteousness and wisdom finally alienated them in disgust. In the old days people got tired of hearing even Aristides called "the Just." If they had heard him habitually call himself "the Just," he would not have lasted in office nearly as long as he did; and the difference between essential human nature in ancient Athens and modern Milwaukee is not spacious.

How far this lesson was lost on the Socialists of Milwaukee is not clear. It seemed to make no impression upon those I met and talked with. Most of them frankly acknowledged the impeachment of sectarianism and impossibilism, and rather gloried in it. One of them, for instance, told me that he was well aware that the Socialists were impossible to work with; that this was quite as it should be, and, for his part, he would rather have defeat than any victory which was not a straight class victory. And another said, "We have been persecuted for ages and generations; now we intend to conquer, and then we will persecute."

So it is extremely doubtful whether the Socialists will get another chance in Milwaukee. Other defects can be somehow patched up and other deficiencies somehow supplied, but deficiency in imagination and humor makes a case for which there is no help. And so it comes about that people instinctively turn towards a man whose sins are human—the prodigal son, for instance, makes a far better figure in the narrative than his Puritan and impossibilist elder brother. So too with administrations—witness Tammany's as compared, for example, with Mr. Low's. Probably,

therefore, the Socialists' opportunity in Milwaukee will not recur, and the honesty, integrity, very considerable ability, and excellent

achievements of the Seidel administration will remain permanently condemned and canceled by sheer organized caprice.